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STANFIELD HALL.

BY J. F. SMITH,

Author of "Minnigrev." "Woman and Her Master," &c.



Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.
AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

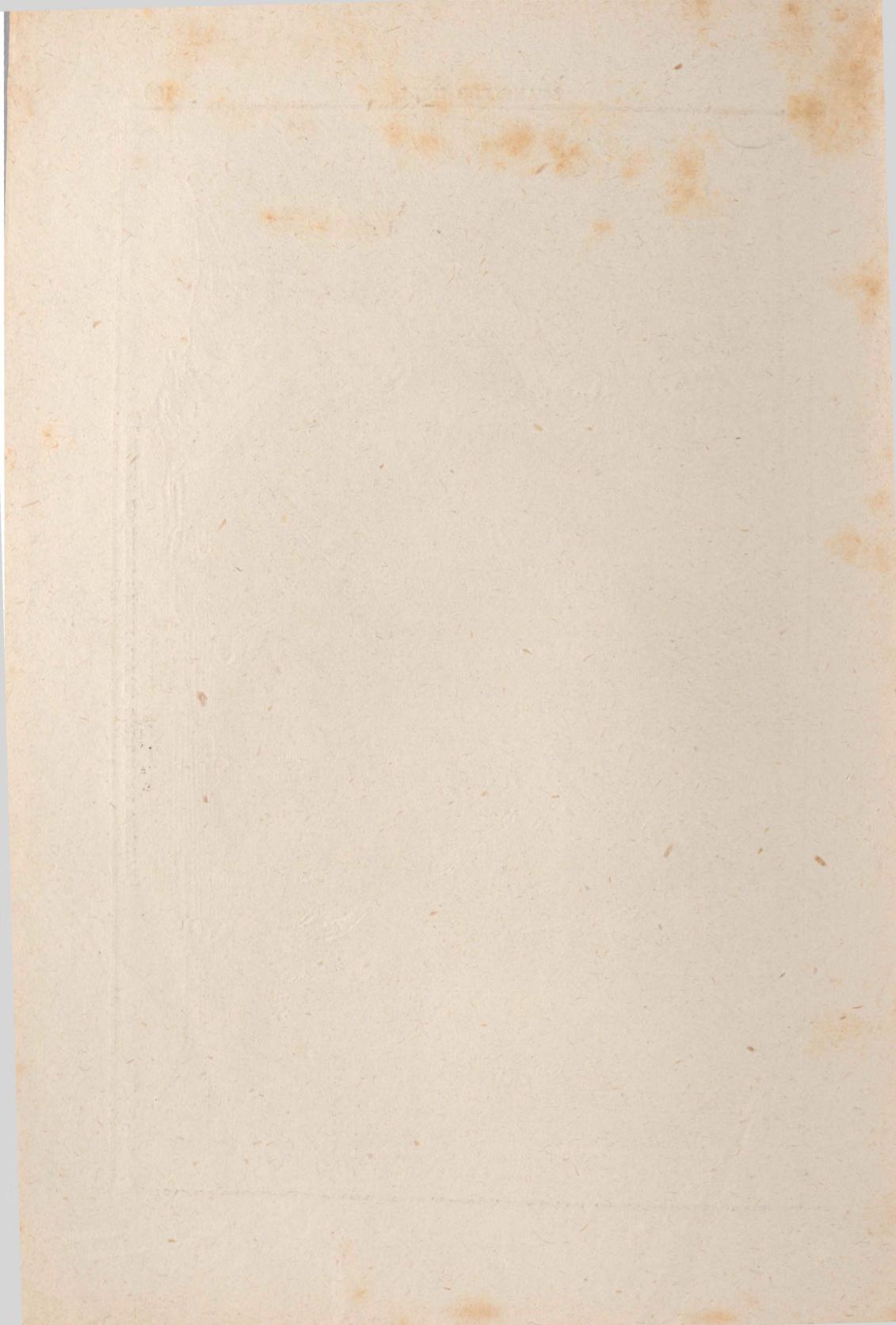
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[MATILDA PROTECTING ISABEL FROM ROBERT OF ARTOIS.]

STANFIELD HALL.



"Traitors!" exclaimed William, "know ye not who I am? Dearly shall ye rue this outrage on your prince! Rather arrest yon plotting priest! Obey my orders, and I swear, e'en by my honour, that riches, favours beyond ambition's dreams, shall recompense the deed!"

"Honour!" interrupted Herbert, contemptuously; "does not the word blister thy tongue, palsy thy craven heart? The violator of innocence, the perjurer, and the robber dares talk of honour! Prince, spare thy eloquence; thou canst not corrupt thy guard; they speak no Norman tongue. Away with him!"

"Should he resist?" demanded Erpingham, through his visor.

"Force must be employed."

"Should he escape?"

The bishop fixed his glance upon the prisoner, and paused ere he replied, wishing the import of his speech to be truly understood.

"Level thine arquebus, and strike him dead."

With these last words he quitted the apartment; and William, seeing that resistance was in vain, resigned himself to his fate. His guards closed around him, and conducted him to the bottom of the staircase, where a close litter was in waiting. For an instant he hesitated, and looked around, as if to summon assistance. None appeared; and the few torches held by the soldiers showed him the arquebus in the hands of the mysterious knight.

Inwardly cursing his fate, and the being who had crossed it, he entered the litter, and in less than an hour found himself a close prisoner in the loftiest tower of the bishop's palace.

CHAPTER IX.

ON their arrival at Filby the fair captives were conducted to a strongly-barred chamber, in the centre of the keep, and left by their ruffian captors to themselves. For a while they sat on the rude couch—the only attempt at comfort in their prison—in speechless dismay. So sudden was the transition from happiness to despair, that both were equally stunned by the blow. To all their entreaties for an explanation, and tempting offers for freedom, their conductors had maintained a sullen silence, and imagination conjured up a thousand terrors more fearful than even the dark reality of their fate.

Isabel, from the natural buoyancy of her disposition, was the first to recover something like composure. "Do not weep, coz—do not weep," she exclaimed, endeavouring to soothe the wretched Matilda,

who sat beside her, clasping her hand in hers. "Perhaps we are only captured for the sake of extorting ransom ; we are no village maidens, to be spirited from our homes without an effort being made to succour us. Many a lance ere this is laid in rest, and many a pennon given to the winds. Ulrick and Mirvan will search the world but they will find us ; nor will Odo of Caen tenderly bear this insult to the sister of his affianced bride. Trust me, that many an hour of future joy will well repay us for the present hour. Dearly the Saxon ruffians shall repent this insult !"

"These are no Saxon outlaws," replied Matilda, struggling for firmness as she spoke ; "but Normans, girl. This blow is struck by those of our own race. Didst thou not mark the armour of the knight who headed the foul enterprise ?"

"Normans ! sayst thou, coz ? Impossible ! they must be Saxons ; who else would dare assail De Bigod's daughter ?"

Matilda mournfully shook her head in token of denial. Accustomed from infancy to the military peculiarities which distinguished the two races, her practised eye was not to be deceived ; she had recognised the Norman chief in Robert of Artois, despite his simple visor and disguise, and could not root the strong conviction from her soul.

"Normans !" again iterated Isabel ; "what can be their motive—plunder or revenge ?"

"Whom have we ever wronged, to provoke the latter ?" said Matilda. "And who would dare avow the baseness of an act like this, by demanding of Ulrick or my brother ransom for their brides ? No," she added bitterly ; "I fear worse outrage yet."

Isabel bounded from her seat like the fawn startled by the hunter's step. Her cousin's words revealed a danger more fearful than her terrors had yet painted ; but her courage rose with the peril : indignation filled her heart ; and although her cheek was pale, insulted virtue flashed from her speaking eyes.

"Let not the ruffian leader of this enterprise hope to find in a daughter of my race," she cried, "a reed, whom the storm of violence can bend, or captivity appal ; there is a refuge which even insult must respect, and vice cannot approach."

"True," replied Matilda ; "death—honour's last shield, and virtue's sure defence."

The word sounded dismally in the vast and dimly lighted chamber where they sat. It was evident, from the preparations made to receive them, that they were expected, for a coarse repast had been prepared, mingled, however, with some degree of luxury ; for although the viands were of the plainest description, the flagons and drinking cups were of silver, then only used in the monasteries and castles of the nobles.

"Stay," said Isabel, whose eye had been mechanically resting on the ill-assorted banquet, and who, struck by a sudden idea, advanced

towards the table, "this may, perchance, afford some clue to our vile gaoler's name." She caught up the massive flagon as she spoke, and advanced with it to one of the torches stuck in an iron sconce upon the wall. The light fell upon a shield rudely graved upon the precious metal; its blazon was a bend ingrailed, surmounted by a lion's head. Both started as they gazed upon it, for they recognised at once the well-known arms of Robert of Artois. To Isabel of Bayeux this was an additional cause of fear, for she well knew the desperate character of the bad man who bore it. Twice had she rejected his unwelcome suit; the last time with a contempt she well knew had deeply stung his pride. Rather would she have found herself the captive of the vilest chief who lived by petty plunder than in the power of that bold, revengeful man.

"Matilda," she cried, clinging to her cousin, and giving way to her not unnatural terrors; "thou hast read the fearful mystery aright; these are no Saxon plunderers; ransom is not their object, for twice hath Robert of Artois dared to pollute my ear with his false tale of love. But I am rightly served," she added bitterly. "Why did I not unfold his insolence to those who would have crushed the hateful serpent ere it had twined its venomous folds around me?"

It was now Matilda's turn to soothe her affrighted cousin, whom the discovery of her captor's name had quite unnerved; like most persons of a quiet and retiring nature, she possessed that latent courage which rises with the danger of occasion, and in the deep recesses of her innocent heart she found a strength where late was nought but timidity and weakness.

"Courage, courage," she cried, repressing her own tears, to assuage her companion's, "all hope hath not yet abandoned us; though human eyes may fail to penetrate our prison, the eye of Heaven is on us, and doubt not, coz, but our guardian angels watch us even here. Soon may my brother's banner circle round these walls, and lay their towers in the dust. Mirvan will come and find thee."

"Dead!" said Isabel, interrupting her; "for if he come not soon, terror too sure will kill me. Matilda," she added, throwing her arms suddenly round her cousin's neck, "by our girlish friendship, our sister love, the tie of blood between us, promise me one thing, or my brain will turn, and reason totter on her seated throne."

"Name it, dearest girl."

"Let not the ruffian tear us from each other; while with thee, I can endure his threats; alone, I should go mad. Thou," she added, passionately, "canst have nought to fear; I am alone the victim. Had not thy ill-starred fortune held thee to my side, thou hadst escaped this last extreme of fate. 'Tis I who have undone thee. Wilt thou not promise me?"

"I will," replied Matilda, willing to soothe her; "nothing but violence shall tear thee from me. Should force be used?"

"Kill me," exclaimed Isabel; "arm thine hand with Roman courage, and strike me dead before thee. By thy brother's love, thine own unsullied purity of soul, thy house's honour, and thy virgin truth, pledge me to this."

There was a mutual pause; Matilda eyed the no longer trembling girl, who stood erect before her, and read the sincerity of her request in her firm glance and look of almost prayer. The request was terrible to one of her gentle nature—terrible from the love she bore the tender victim—terrible from the danger which surrounded them.

Calmly she advanced from the couch on which they both had been seated towards the table, and taking up a small, sharp knife, concealed it in her bosom. Isabel saw the action and understood it. A slight flush suffused her pallid cheek, but passed as quickly as it came; her only comment was a kiss upon the brow of the heroic girl. Matilda understood it.

"It is, indeed, a terrible and last resort," she said; "but should all else fail, I will be near thee; fear not, Isabel, by our mutual love, living, the villain's arms shall never clasp thee."

The exhausted girl, overpowered by the violence of her emotions, sank into the arms of her courageous cousin, in whose promise she beheld her last resource against dishonour or a life of misery.

* * * * *

The same night Herbert de Lozenga was seated in his oratory. He had much to reflect upon, for his own position was not without considerable danger. In arresting the person of his monarch's favourite son, and probably future sovereign, he had irretrievably committed himself with that bold, bad man, whose cruel nature never forgave an injury or a slight. But still he quailed not; personal consideration had never yet influenced him in the path of duty, and he was determined to pursue it, regardless of all consequence to himself. Ulrick's happiness was dearer to him than his life, and he resolved at all hazards to secure it.

It was necessary, therefore, that his dangerous prisoner should be securely watched; and he determined to trust his guardianship to Walter Tyrrel, a young knight who had long been attached to his service, and over whose birth, like Ulrick's, a cloud of mystery hung.

In the age at which we write, it was by no means uncommon for the great nobles and prelates to attach to their households esquires and knights of gentle birth, who were trained to arms or letters, as their respective tastes or inclinations might incline them. Raising his silver call, he summoned a lay brother to his presence, and directed him to find the youthful knight in question.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, "Tyrrel will be his surest guard. The youth whom he would deprive of his inheritance, whose life long ere this he would have taken had he but dreamt of his existence.

Poor boy!" he added; "cruelly he crossed thy sainted mother's path. May he prove less dangerous to her son."

The young knight entered the oratory as he concluded, flattered by the unusual confidence, for he was not only ambitious in his nature, but reckless in the means by which he advanced his fortunes. From his cold and selfish nature, the prelate had never loved him; still he was far from suspecting the deep treachery and heartless vices which his calculation hid from even his observance. Perhaps the kind man's heart was too full of love for his first *protégé* to interest him deeply in the second; for Ulrick was to him even as a son.

"Tyrrel," said the bishop, "I am about to bestow on thee a mark of confidence—the precursor, chance, of future favour. Thou art not ignorant that I have an inmate here—something between a guest and a prisoner."

"I am aware," answered Sir Walter; "my leader, Sir George of Erpingham, told me as much when he arrived."

"Know you his rank?"

"I guess it, my good lord."

"Then you must know how necessary 'tis that unusual ward be kept. To you I confide the custody of his person; guard him with all honour, but as strictly as you would watch your mother's fame and own inheritance. Perhaps," he added, with a smile, "you may one day thank me for his capture, and the trust I now repose in you. You know where he is lodged?"

"In the eastern tower, beyond the cloisters. He must be skilled indeed who could break prison there."

"Go," continued the prelate, at the same time giving him a ring. "George of Erpingham, on the sight of this, will resign his post; send him to me, for I have further employment for his zeal. Remember, young man, those who would gain my confidence must win it by fidelity and honour. Farewell."

Walter Tyrrel quitted the oratory with a gratified air, which resulted less from pride in the confidence reposed in him, than the conviction that it was something which might be turned to his own advantage and aggrandisement, before which honour and breach of trust were idle names. Besides, he never loved the prelate. He had long been jealous of his partiality for Ulrick, whose elevation galled him, and whose agony, on the abduction of his bride, he had seen with secret pleasure. The opportunity of thwarting them was too tempting to be thrown away.

"My lord bishop plays a daring game," he muttered, as he directed his steps towards the tower where Prince William was confined; "others, perchance, may play as bold a one. 'Tis not the first time both gaoler and captive have been missing. If the Red Norman bid but high enough, the path to liberty lays straight before him. I will not baulk my fortune."

So saying, the newly-appointed guard entered the chamber in the lower basement of the tower, where George of Erpingham and a company of his men were keeping watch. At the sight of the prelate's signet the brave old soldier resigned the command to the treacherous knight, and withdrew to his own quarters, to remove his armour, ere he sought the bishop. Herbert de Lozenga had not been long alone when the lay brother whom he had despatched in search of Tyrrel returned to inform him that a pilgrim from Normandy was at the gate, and demanded to speak with him.

"Not now," replied the superior; "not now. My mind is occupied by thoughts of too much moment. Give him hospitality for the night; in the morning I will see him. Tell him this, and speak him welcome in my name."

"I told him so," replied the old monk. "I told him so; but he was obstinate, called me a prating dotard, and swore by Rollo that he would see you, holy father, ere he slept; then called for wine, and ordered Father Felix to bring him a manchet, as if he were in an hotel, instead of a community of Christian priests."

"Quick," exclaimed Herbert, starting from his seat, "conduct him to our presence instantly. If it be as I suspect," he murmured, after the old man quitted the oratory, astonished at the vehemence of his superior's manner, "the game is in my hands, and Ulrick, wronged boy, the tyrant shall himself restore to thee thy bride, or pay his crimes with forfeit of his crown."

The moment the lay brother ushered in the stranger, Herbert de Lozenga recognised, despite his disguise, the eldest son of the Conqueror, whose fate has been the theme of many a minstrel's song; who, born to inherit a crown, passed the greater portion of his life within a prison; whose courage was always rendered useless by his recklessness, and who consoled himself for the loss of liberty and power by the wine-cup and the song.

"Prince, in the name of every saint, what brings you to this land," said the ecclesiastic, "where your path is beset with perils? Know you not that your father hath decided to bestow England on your brother William, leave you, as eldest born, the ancient fief of Normandy, and that many of the nobles approve this disposition of the crown?"

"Hang the crown," replied the impetuous Robert; "if England boasts no better wine than the lean draught your cellarar set before me, William may govern it for me; but, perhaps," he added, bursting into a jocose laugh, "where the charity is large the wine is weak. I'll wager a hundred pieces, my good lord, none of the same vintage ever graced your table: were the fat and pious brother who served me to drink no other until Easter, he would require a few yards less of broad-cloth in his frock."

"The draught shall be amended, prince," said Herbert; "but answer me my question: what brings you here?"

"Caprice ! Caprice ! the whim of an heir who rides over his estate *incog.*, while its possessor recites his last *Confiteor*. Our father keeps his Court at Rouen ; but we know, from a sure hand, his health breaks fast. Like the dying bear, 'tis dangerous to approach him ; he hath already hanged two physicians, and engaged a third, an unbelieving Jew."

"What is his malady ?" demanded Herbert de Lozenga, anxiously, for he foresaw the conflict which would probably follow the Conqueror's death.

"The same which ails your wine," replied the prince, with a heartless laugh ; "he hath too much water in his barrel. The French king asked when his vassal brother would be brought to bed : 'twas a good jest, but must be dearly paid."

"How so ?"

"Our choleric father swore to be churched in Nôtre Dame, with twenty thousand lances in his train. He is the man at least to keep his word ; he hath already wasted the Seine with fire and sword, as first-fruits of his oath."

"And for a jest," exclaimed the bishop, "an idle jest, spoken in an hour of mirth, when wine had tempted reason, and the unguarded lips utter the wayward fancies of the brain, blood must be shed, houses desolated, cities destroyed, and kind hearts broken ! Earth ! earth !" he added mournfully, "such are thy rulers !"

"Earth soon will count one more and less," interrupted Robert, who contemplated his father's approaching death with anything but dissatisfaction ; indeed, the conduct of the former had been sufficiently harsh towards him to break all tie of blood between them. He had thwarted him in his dearest wish ; and, urged by his partiality for the unworthy William, would have stripped his elder son even of his inheritance of Normandy, had not the consent of the King of France, as suzerain, been necessary—a consent, he well knew, it would be hopeless to solicit, the policy of the French Court being to disunite the Crowns of England and Normandy : their descending on one head rendered the ducal vassal more powerful than his master.

"Prince," said Herbert, gravely, "Heaven only knows whether thou art come for good or evil ; but thou art come in an eventful hour—thy brother is an inmate of my palace."

Robert heard the information with evident surprise, and for a moment eyed the speaker keenly, as if to read his very heart. The examination was apparently satisfactory ; for he almost instantly resumed his former expression of careless confidence, and demanded, as if it were the most important circumstance in the world to him—

"A guest ?"

"No," gravely answered his host.

"A prisoner ?"

"Yes."

The prince's reply was a loud, careless laugh ; the jest seemed to strike him more than the advantage to be drawn from it, so contradictory was his character : at one moment all energy, at the next indifference to everything ; capable of conceiving a bold design, but wanting the perseverance to insure success. Well had his mother, the Queen Matilda, designated him as the weathercock of impulse and of—folly she might have added, and of fortune also.

"And so you have caged the wolf," he cried—"or rather the fox, I should say, designating our royal brother from the colour of his hair. Leave a priest alone to bait a snare ! How fell he into it ?"

"Prince," answered Herbert, with offended dignity, "I am not one of those who traffic in pitfalls or in snares. Your brother is my prisoner, to answer for a cruel outrage on a maiden's liberty ; openly I arrested him, openly I'll guard him, till the outrage is atoned and the lady free. But come," he added, "the time is dark with import, and I have matter which concerns you deeply. Lay for a while that reckless levity of heart aside, and let us speak like men who watch the game of life."

"Willingly, my lord," replied the prince, brought to something like seriousness by the prelate's tone ; "but answer me first one question—the boy whom I confided to your care—speak—lives he yet ?—and may I not behold him ?"

"He does. His training hath not shamed his birth. Fifteen months are passed since the sword of my good lord of Kent hath dubbed him knight ; he hath remained ever since attached to our Court ; e'en now he guards my prisoner in his tower."

A singular smile, half of mischief and half fun, passed over the still handsome features of the Norman prince at the intelligence, but it soon passed away ; and motioning to the prelate to precede him, he followed to a small recess at the back of the oratory, where we will leave them to converse on business of deep import, the result of which may soon become apparent to our readers.

* * * * *

The first beams of the rising sun had already tinged the east with gold, and gilded the graceful spire and turrets of the cathedral, as Ulrick and Mirvan, attended by most of the nobles who had been present at the banquet, returned from their unsuccessful pursuit. The men looked jaded, and their horses worn ; still not a single complaint was heard ; for rough and careless as the soldiers were, they sympathised with the despair of their two leaders, who, pale as marble, and with bloodshot eyes, gazed hopelessly upon each other. Robert of Artois, the unsuspected author of the deed, had been one of the foremost in the pursuit, carefully directing the pursuers, by his well-feigned zeal, far from the path they should have taken. As the various stragglers came slowly up before the castle, he reined his tired steed, and said, "Farewell, my friends. Should chance

discover the author of this outrage, which fills each heart with rage and every honest tongue with scorn, send but a glove to Filby in token of your need, and in an hour my banner shall be spread to meet you. This present hour business of import calls me home. That once despatched, I am again your servant."

"Thanks!" exclaimed the broken-hearted Ulrick; "he is a friend indeed who shares a sorrow as if it were his own. On your return send out your men to scour the country round. I'll fill his gauntlet with gold who brings intelligence of my lost bride, or names the villain who has wrought this mischief; dearly the heartless ruffian should abide it."

Courageous as Robert of Artois naturally was, he quailed beneath the expression of Ulrick's eye as he pronounced the threat. A desire to find himself within his stronghold of Filby seized upon him. Raising his helmet, therefore, in sign of adieu, he cried—

"Doubt not, noble youths, all that friendship can achieve shall be attempted; my men shall spare nor spur nor rein till your lost treasure's found."

Hella, the bard, who had, despite his vast age, been one of the first to mingle in the pursuit, cast a suspicious glance on Robert of Artois as he rode off. Odo of Caen observed it; he had not forgiven the bard his song, which seemed indirectly to call upon the Saxons to throw off the Conqueror's yoke, and to censure the misrule of the Norman race. He gladly seized, therefore, the opportunity of venting his spleen, which the unsuccessful result of the pursuit had still further tended to increase.

"Sir Saxon," he cried, "thou lovest not our brother of Artois. Heaven defend me from as dark a greeting as thy look conveys. In what hath he displeased thee?"

"His deeds," coolly answered the aged Saxon.

"Humph!" replied the questioner; "'tis difficult for Norman deeds to please a Saxon's judgment; but what particular deed of Robert of Artois hath merited the harshness of such judgment? Sir bard, explain me that."

"His share in this night's outrage."

All started, and even Odo of Caen was staggered by the coolness and firmness of the reply. Ulrick and Mirvan gathered with the rest of the nobles round the old man, and eagerly demanded upon what proofs he grounded his assertion. Some, who saw in it only a splenetic attempt to sow dissension between the Saxon and Norman chiefs, cried shame; and had not the bereaved lovers and several of their friends drawn their swords, the old bard would have rued his temerity in daring to accuse one of the most powerful of the Norman chiefs. After much quarrelling and confusion, Mirvan, whose office of Marshal of the Angles gave him most authority amongst them, at last obtained something like silence.

"The wisdom of age," he cried, "is not slightly to be contemned;

let Hella be heard ! First I demand upon what proof he founds his accusation—an accusation monstrous if false, and terrible if true."

"Upon no proof," replied Hella ; "but upon——"

The rest of his speech was lost in the clamour which the friends of Robert of Artois contrived to raise. Crowding, they thronged around the old man, who gazed unmoved upon them ; their looks and words were menacing, when Ulrick thrust himself between ; like the young lion who first sees his prey, his blood was roused—despair had made him reckless.

"Back ! " he exclaimed, tracing a circle with his sword ; "let him who is most tired of life first cross it. Were ye the friends of the Norman devil whose name Robert of Artois bears, I'd brave ye all in such a cause as this. Is this the amity ye lately swore ?—is this the justice Saxons must expect at Norman hands ?—against an old man, too ! Shame on your courage, sirs."

The vast body of Edda's troops, hearing the voice of their lord, thronged instantly around him. Odo and the more reasonable of the Normans felt that he was right ; and the assailants, seeing that they were outnumbered, sheathed their weapons.

"Let him explain his words, and justify them, if he can," they cried. "Public has been the accusation ; as public be the proofs."

"Who saw Robert of Artois at the banquet ?" demanded the old bard. There was a pause—none remembered to have seen him. "Who can tell when and where he first joined in the pursuit ?" he added.

"I—I," exclaimed several of the younger nobles ; "he joined us in the market-place, and all have seen how eagerly he conducted the pursuit."

"Ay," exclaimed a third, "and well he hath been recompensed."

"Conducted the pursuit !" echoed Hella. "True, he did conduct it everywhere but to the road which led to his own felon den. Who twice misled us by false intelligence ?—Robert of Artois. Who of all the nobles was absent at the banquet when the outrage was committed ?—Robert of Artois. Who alone, of all those who swore to avenge the crime, hath withdrawn from the pursuit ?—Robert of Artois. And who," he added, with increased energy, "is the vile ravisher of innocence ?—Robert of Artois."

Conviction flashed in an instant upon both Mirvan and his friend, the former of whom had frequently remarked his passionate glances directed towards Isabel. So profound was the impression Hella's words produced, that even the culprit's nearest friends were dumb. Odo of Caen was the first to break the silence.

"It must be seen to," he exclaimed. "Let the esquires give orders to refresh our men ; and then towards Filby."

The words had scarcely passed the speaker's lips, when a servitor, bearing the badge of Herbert de Lozenge on his vest, galloped to

the ground, and, without waiting to dismount, placed in the hands of Ulrick, who hastily tore the seal, a missive from the prelate, which detailed the treachery of Robert of Artois, but without alluding to his prisoner's share in it—a circumstance which, for many prudential reasons, he wished for awhile to remain concealed.

"It is confirmed," he cried, glancing over the letter. "Robert of Artois is the vile ravisher—the traitor who hath broken the bond of peace—stolen like some midnight thief upon my path, and robbed me of my happiness. Who will dispute his guilt when it is known that the venerable bishop is his accuser? But I will have revenge!" he added, drawing his sword—an example which was followed by the aged Edda and his Saxon followers.

"By Him whose name you stars pronounce," continued Ulrick, "whose might the roaring sea and tempest's breath alike make manifest, I here devote my soul to its fulfilment—a wild, exterminating, deep revenge!"

A shout of execration from the Normans and Saxons followed the words of Ulrick, for the insult to both was equal in the outrage offered to the brides of their leaders; eagerly they demanded to be led against the stronghold of the knightly robber, vowing not to leave one stone upon another till they had rescued his prisoners. The preparations were quickly made, and ere the sun was an hour higher in the heavens, the united hosts, under the conduct of Mirvan and Ulrick, were on their way to Filby.

* * * * *

Matilda had beheld with joy the excitement of her cousin at last relieved by tears, as she sank exhausted with her griefs upon the couch beside her. By a benevolent provision of nature, sorrow or pain, beyond a certain limit, stupefy the brain, or life would succumb beneath them. Isabel had gradually sobbed herself into a feverish slumber, disturbed by fearful dreams and visionary terrors, from which she would occasionally start, but recompose herself on hearing the low, sweet voice of Matilda, or feeling the affectionate pressure of her hand. The latter slept not, but had passed the night in prayer, tempering her soul with courage. On considering her position, she felt convinced that her imprisonment was but the consequence of her companionship with Isabel. The purity of her nature did not allow her to suppose that her beauty had excited the lawless desire of anyone; for, like the flowers of the field, she was unconscious of her loveliness. Partially reassured, therefore, on her own account, she resolved to devote herself to the protection of her cousin, whom she loved as a sister, and the affianced bride of her brother. The rays of morning began to penetrate through the strongly-barred windows, when the watcher, seeing that her charge still slept, advanced to the casement, to see if she could recognise from the surrounding country the place of their imprisonment. The view fully confirmed her suspicions that they were the captives of Robert

of Artois ; for Filby Broad, with its sedgy islands and woody banks, lay stretched like a clouded mirror in the morning mists before her. As the sun advanced in power, the lake became more and more distinct, till she could trace the wild duck leading her brood in matronly pride on its placid bosom, or the stately heron, patiently watching for its finny prey from some projecting stone close by the shore, where the waters were not too deep for its long legs to wade, or neck to plunge. Sometimes she would watch the solitary drake, as, with its sharp cry, it rose from the water, and directed its arrowy flight over the distant woods of Ormsby, or the low, marshy grounds which lie between them—envy its rapid flight, and sigh for freedom.

Her reveries were broken by the gentle closing of a door. In an instant the terrible reality of her position pressed upon her ; and, turning to confront the intruder, she beheld, to her great relief, that it was a woman. So completely was she shielded from observation by the recess in which she stood, and so quiet had been the movement, that the stranger failed to perceive her ; and there was something so peculiar in her manner, that Matilda determined to observe her. Her apparel, which was extremely rich, partook more of the Eastern than European character ; a saffron-coloured short vest fell over a white cymar, which descended to the wearer's ankles ; both were embroidered at the hems with gold. Her figure was tall and commanding, and her features, which were still beautiful, although marked by the strife of passions, bore the peculiar characteristics of the Jewish race. It was evident, from her costume, that she could not be a menial ; for, independent of the richness of her dress, gems of considerable value glittered upon her arms and neck, or were braided in her long, dark hair. Cautiously she approached the couch, and gazed upon the sleeper ; her features became dreadfully agitated as she did so.

"She is beautiful," she murmured, or rather hissed through her clenched teeth ; "young, too ; perhaps nobly born—innocent and fair ;—what chance have I, withered as I am in form and mind, to retain his heart against such a rival ? He will soon arrive to clasp her in his eager arms, to breathe his serpent vows into her ear, to press his poisonous kisses on her lips, and laugh to scorn the lost, degraded Rachel. Let him come," she added, firmly ; "he shall find the kiss of death upon her lips before him ; the worm shall first supplant him in her love ! " As the last words fell upon the astonished listener's ear, the Jewess drew a sharp, glittering blade from beneath her vest, and advanced yet nearer, with the stealthy pace of a tigress, towards the couch. Matilda had gradually become spell-bound with terror at the evident purpose of the stranger. Her limbs were rooted to the spot, and the powers of speech and motion seemed alike denied her ; her agony became intense ; vainly she struggled with the torpor which oppressed her.

Nor was it till the arm of the woman was actually raised over the unconscious Isabel, that, with a piercing shriek, she burst the horrible species of fascination which bound her, exclaiming as she did so—

“ Think on thy soul ! Shed not the blood of innocence.”

So thrilling was the cry, that the affrighted Isabel started from her slumbers, waking from fearful visions to a more fearful reality before her. The murdereress was equally startled ; it seemed as if the appealing voice of conscience had thundered in her ear, “ Thou shalt do no murder ! ” She gazed in surprise upon the fair girl who had so suddenly interposed between her and her intended victim, and who, with arm encircling the agitated Isabel, boldly confronted her.

“ Who art thou ? ” she falteringly demanded.

“ Victims, like yourself, to the foulest treachery,” replied Matilda ; “ though, perhaps, unlike you, unwilling ones. How can this poor girl excite your hatred, that you should seek to stain your hands in blood ? Rather assist us to escape our tyrant’s power, for the honour of your sex and the memory of your mother’s love.”

The word mother seemed to touch a chord whose every tone vibrated in agony. Dropping the still upraised weapon, she clasped her hands upon her brow, as if stricken by a sudden pain. The flush of passion on her features was replaced by the purer blush of shame, and in an instant the tears gushed from her burning eyes, and relieved her overfraught heart ; for, fallen as Rachel was, one trace of Eden lingered in her yet. In a voice broken by sighs, she murmured—

“ Speak not of my mother, lest from the grave she rise to curse her child.”

“ She is mad,” whispered Isabel—“ mad. If friends come not soon to rescue us, reason will leave me too.”

“ No ! ” said Rachel, dashing the tears from her dark eyes, as if ashamed of her momentary weakness, “ I am not mad ! Would to our Father Abraham I were ! For madness cannot equal the pangs of a despised and unrequited love.”

“ You love our captor, Robert of Artois, then ? ” exclaimed Matilda, a ray of hope dawning on her soul.

“ Ay, maiden, love him as the lost daughters of our race alone can love—beyond home, parents, honour, life—more,” she added, with still increasing excitement—“ more e’en than Heaven itself : all but life I have already sacrificed for him, and would again, though but for one kind smile ; alas ! ‘tis long since I received one.”

“ And he requites your sacrifice——? ”

“ With scorn ! ” interrupted Rachel ; “ with scorn ! whose serpent tooth gnaws deeper into a woman’s heart than aught on earth beside. I once was good,” she added, “ gentle as yourselves, not meanly nurtured or ignobly bred. What hath it made me ? A raging tigress ;

changed my woman's heart into a fiend's; destroyed the kindlier impulse of my nature; made me in heart, if not in deed, a murderer!"

"Alas!" said Isabel; "what have I done to cause such fearful hate?"

"Loved him I love," replied Rachel, whose jealousy returned as she gazed on the lovely girl before her, and mentally compared her opening loveliness with her own fading beauty; "is it not enough to give me cause to hate thee?"

"Woman," exclaimed Isabel, with dignity, "be the words thy happiness or bane, be they for good or ill, know that, if Robert of Artois were king, Isabel of Bayeux would never share his throne; but would prefer the convent's gloom, the meanest hut, the shelter of the grave itself, to his polluted couch. I loathe and scorn him."

There was a tone of sincerity in the speaker's words which carried conviction to the heart. The Jewess gazed attentively upon her for a few moments—at first suspiciously, but at last with confidence, for the candid brow of the fair girl was not one where falsehood had ever traced its crooked characters. Despite herself, she could not but believe her.

"Deceived!" she muttered to herself, "again deceived! Thank Heaven, this crime, at least, is spared me! Forgive me, maiden," she added, "my evil purpose; but I was stung—deceived—wrought on by jealous pangs; they told me thou wert come to be his bride—his willing bride—and I, who loved, too easily believed them. But if thou lovest him not," she added, "why art thou here?"

"Ask of the vulture," said Matilda, "why the wounded dove was found within his nest; ask of the tiger why the bleeding fawn is trembling in his den. Art thou answered?"

"I see—I see," exclaimed the Jewess, struggling with her evil passions, which were again excited by the idea of Robert's love for another; "but I will save thee. The fool who poured this tale of poison in my ear did it to gain my love—fool! not to know that hearts like mine can feel but once its spell, and break when it is broken. Wouldst thou be free?"

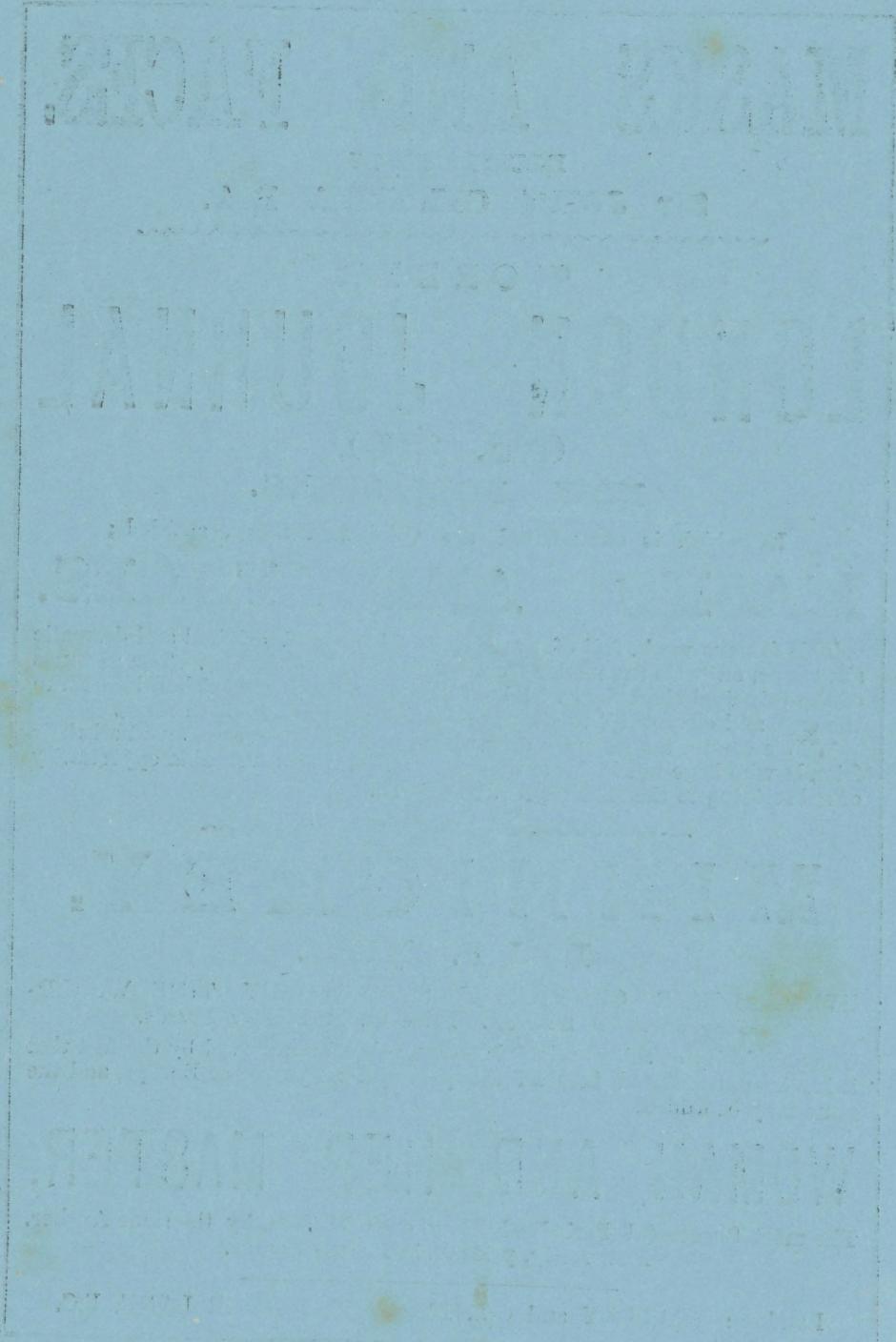
"Gladly," exclaimed both Matilda and Isabel.

"But you must swear," she added, "that if by my means the path lies open to you, no injury shall fall upon your captor. False as he is, I would not, e'en to save my perilled soul, harm one hair of his ungrateful head. Promise me this."

"Easily answered: Matilda, my cousin, and myself solemnly swear never to breathe, save in confession, our captor's fearful name."

"Away, then," said Rachel, hurriedly; "morning advances, and he may soon be here—here to mar our plans, and to prevent your flight."

"It is prevented," exclaimed a stern voice behind them. They



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